

Message Text

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43

ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SS-15 SSO-00 CCO-00 OPR-02 A-01 SY-05

OC-06 DODE-00 NSC-05 NSCE-00 CIAE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00

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R 251022Z JUL 76

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1321

INFO AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: AEMR, LE, US, SY

SUBJECT: SHORT ROUTE TO DAMASCUS

1. AS DEPARTMENT AND DAMASCUS ARE AWARE, FOR SEVERAL WEEKS THERE HAS BEEN REGULAR VEHICULAR TRAFFIC BETWEEN HERE AND DAMASCUS THROUGH SOFAR. IN LEAVING BEIRUT CARS TURN EAST JUST BEYOND AIRPORT OFF SIDON ROAD, WINDING THEIR WAY THROUGH AARAMOUN AAND BACK MOUNTAIN ROADS UNTIL THEY REACH SOFAR. FROM SOFAR THEY TAKE MAIN ROAD TO DAMASCUS. THIS IS ROUTE FRENCH COURIER TAKES ON REGULAR BASIS. IT IS ALSO ROUTE THAT BRITISH HAVE BEEN USING FROM TIMEE TO TIME. AUB AND MEA HAVE ALSO BEEN RUNNING SMALL CONVOYS ALONG THIS ROUTE. LAPSED TIME TO DAMASCUS IS ABOUT THREE AND A HALF HOURS VERSUS FIVE TO SIX HOURS TO DAMASCUS BY NABATIYA ROUTE.

2. IRANIAN AMBASSADOR, WHO CAME BY THIS ROUTE LAST WEEK, INFORMS ME THAT MUCH OF ROUTE ON LEBANESE SIDE GOES THROUGH DRUZE TERRITORY. HE NOTED, HOWEVER, THAT FROM TIME TO TIME A CHECKPOINT IS ESTABLISHED BY A COMMUNIST GROUP. IRANIAN AMBASSADOR IS RUNNING A 15-20 CAR CONVOY TO DAMASCUS OVER THIS ROUTE TODAY WITH PASS PROVIDED BY JAMAL JUMBLATT, DRUZE CHIEFTAIN. (HE HAS ALREADY DONE THIS ONCE BEFORE.) IRANIAN AMBASSADOR

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SAYS THAT THIS PASS, ALONG WITH STANDARD BAKSHEESH LEFT

AT CHECKPOINTS (FIVE LEBANESE POUNDS PER CAR), IS ALL THAT IS NEEDED. HIS CONVOYS TRAVEL WITHOUT AN ESCORT. MEANWHILE, FRENCH CHARGE HAS UNDERTAKEN TO PROVIDE ME WITH MORE SPECIFIC INFORMATION REGARDING NUMBER AND NATURE OF CHECKPOINTS FRENCH HAVE ENCOUNTERED ON THIS ROUTE. ACTING AUB PRESIDENT STATES THAT THERE ARE SOME 22 CHECKPOINTS, OF WHICH TWO-THIRDS ARE SYRIAN. AUB CAR PAYS NO BAKSHEESH.

3. COMMENT: IN VIEW OF PLO'S RELUCTANCE THIS PAST WEEK TO ESCORT US ON LONGER ROUTE TO NABATIYA, WE INTEND TO KEEP OPEN POSSIBILITY USING AARMOUN-SOFAR ROUTE IN FUTURE. SINCE PLO WILL NOT REPEAT NOT PROVIDE ARMED ESCORT ON THIS ROUTE, WE WILL HAVE TO CONSIDER WHETHER IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO OBTAIN ALTERNATE ESCORT (PERHAPS LEBANESE ARAB ARMY, WITH WHOM WE NOW HAVE CLOSE WORKING RELATIONS, OR JUMBLATT PARTISANS). ALTERNATIVELY, WE MIGHT WISH WEIGH VERY CAREFULLY SAFETY OF PROCEEDING ON THIS ROUTE WITHOUT ARMED ESCORT. IN ANY CASE, WE WILL BE STUDYING THIS FURTHER AND WILL BE SHARING OUR VIEWS WITH DEPARTMENT BEFORE MAKING A DECISION. IF THIS ROUTE PROVES FEASIBLE, WE MIGHT WISH TO INITIATE, AS ARE FRENCH AND GERMANS, A REGULAR COURIER RUN WHICH WOULD ENABLE US TO BRING IN SUPPLIES ON A REGULAR BASIS AND TAKE OFFICIAL PERSONNEL IN AND OUT AS NEEDED. SEELYE

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